

To Teach and to Please: Reality TV as an Agent of Societal Change

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To Teach and to Please: Reality TV as an Agent of Societal Change

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis
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Boston College
December 2011

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the completion of this senior thesis. First and foremost, I would like to recognize my family for encouraging me to attempt new things, and to always pursue a challenging course of study. My mother and father have shown nothing but the utmost love and support for me in every venture (and adventure) that I have undertaken, and I am eternally thankful to them.

Further, I want to recognize my peers. First, my roommates: Drew Galloway, Jay Farmer, Dan Campbell, Fin O'Neill, and (at one time) Jonah Tomsick. Second, my a capella group, the BC Acoustics. Third, my friends, both from Boston College and from home (you know who you are). And fourth, my wonderful girlfriend, Sarah Tolman. Having no siblings, I embrace my close friends as my family. Each one of you gave me inspiration, determination, love, laughter, and support during the conducting of this research, and I sincerely thank you for this.

Finally, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my professor and thesis advisor, Dr. William E. Stanwood. His efforts on this paper cannot be overstated, nor can the amount of knowledge and skills I gained from working with him. He was always more than willing to review my writing, and his suggestions and edits significantly improved the quality of this paper. He was eternally optimistic, had such confidence in me, and used his experience to shape this paper into what it is today. I feel extremely privileged to have had him as my advisor.

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Abstract

This analysis examined the effects of reality television on its audiences. The purpose of the research was twofold: to uncover the effects that reality television has upon its audiences, and to determine whether or not these effects indicate that reality TV acts as an agent of societal change. The genre was divided into two distinct programming types: documentary as diversion and lifestyle programs. The findings suggested that reality TV has many audience effects. Discussion centered around the investigation of the second research question. It was concluded that lifestyle programs are agents of societal change, while documentary as diversion programs are not. Limitations and suggestions for further research were put forth.

Introduction

In *Poetics*, the earliest surviving work of literary theory, Aristotle stated that the two main objectives of ancient Greek theatre were to teach and to please (Butcher, 2000). Aristotle said that to learn and to feel pleasure are two of humanity's deepest instincts, and they are often felt in conjunction with one another: "The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general" (Butcher, 2000, p. 7). The Greek theatre was one of the main forms of large-scale public entertainment at that time, and would be the focal point for lively discussion. Dunkle asserted that theatre was a "public genre from its earliest beginnings at Athens; that is, it was intended to be presented in a theater before an audience" (1986, p. 1). Reaching many thousands of audience members at once, and more, over repeated performances, these plays became a staple of the cultural fabric of ancient Greece.

Theatre in this time period was conceived out of and first performed during a festival called the Dionysia, honoring the god Dionysus (Gill, 2011). The largest of these festivals was called the City Dionysia, and Dunkle explained:

The Athenian theater was not a business enterprise like our theater but was financed by the Athenian state as an integral part of an Athenian religious festival: the City Dionysia. Three tragic poets were chosen to present their plays by a magistrate called an archon who had charge of the City Dionysia. (1986, p. 1)

After the three plays were performed, there was a judging ceremony and one playwright was declared the winner, fostering discussion about the plays. Dionysus was the Greek god of wine and revelry, as well as the patron god of the theatre and agriculture. Because of these associations, playwrights who entered plays in this festival often had license to perform plays with plots that were quite controversial. As evidence of this, look no further than *Lysistrata*, an anti-war play put on in the midst of the Peloponnesian War. As Jacobus stated: “At the time *Lysistrata* was written (411 BCE), Athens had suffered a steady diet of war for more than twenty years...Aristophanes [the playwright] opposed the imperialist attitudes that conflicted with the democratic spirit of only a generation earlier” (2009, p. 165). *Lysistrata* was anti-government, thus teaching the audience a new perspective on society, and it fulfilled the second of Aristotle’s two objectives for theatre by entertaining the audience with its comedic style. These two elements can be traced from their beginnings in Aristotle’s Greece to the mainstream media of today.

In America today, there are a few forms of media that are arguably as pervasive as theatre in ancient Greece. One of these is television (or TV). According to recent Nielsen data, in 2010 the average U.S. household has 2.5 TV sets (up from 2.24 in 2007), and the average American watches 35.6 hours of TV per week, or more than 5 hours per day (Nielsenwire, 2011, p. 1) (Herr, 2007, p.1). As Americans turn to TV for everything from news to sports, home decorating ideas (*Trading Spaces*) to crab fishing drama (*Deadliest Catch*), it is more important than ever to understand the effects of this medium on the audiences, and on the producers responsible for the programming.

Television is not only ubiquitous; it is highly trusted in our society. In a 2002 study from the University of Miami’s Department of Communication, by Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen,

Driscoll, and Casey, television was seen as the most credible form of media. It was shown to be the “primary source of information” (p. 16) and scored highest of the three media types studied (newspaper and online being the other two) in credibility. Audiences are watching more television than ever before, and they are putting their faith in this medium to bring them credible programming. Furthermore, audiences are trusting TV with more than just news. Oullette and Murray (2009) explained this from the producers’ side: “...reality TV [programs] provide privatized social services to the needy...the TV industry has found that there is money to be made by taking on the duties of the philanthropist, the social worker, the benefactor, and the ‘guardian angel’” (p. 2). As television becomes an ever more pervasive and powerful medium, and audiences see the changes wrought by TV programs, this trend will continue to escalate.

While every genre of TV exerts influences on certain audiences (Gerbner, 1998), this paper will deal specifically with what is commonly called “reality television”. There are many definitions of this genre, and it has undergone significant alterations and schisms since its first popular iteration, that being Allen Funt’s *Candid Camera* in the 1950s. Annette Hill, in her book Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television, articulated a number of “Styles and techniques associated with reality TV, such as non-professional actors, unscripted dialogue, surveillance footage, hand-held cameras, [and] seeing events unfold as they are happening in front of the camera” (2005, p. 41). She also illustrated the breadth of the genre:

Sometimes called popular factual television, reality TV is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama. Originally used as a category for law and order popular factual programmes containing ‘on-scene’ footage of cops on the job, reality TV has become the success story of television in the 1990s and 2000s. There are reality TV programs about everything and anything, from healthcare to hairdressing, from people to pets. (2005, p. 2)

Indeed, Murray cautioned the reader: “To begin a discussion of the reality television genre, it is important to first recognize that there are many different formats – most of which are generic

hybrids themselves – that fall within this category” (2009, p. 67). As we examine this genre of television that has made inroads into almost every walk of American life, it is important to look at the historical background of reality TV.

History of Reality TV

What we now think of as reality television began in the 1950s with a man named Allen Funt. Before creating the first, and arguably most well-known, hidden camera show *Candid Camera* (1959-67), Funt worked for the Ford Foundation producing television programs. In 1954, Funt produced a show called *Children of the U.N.*, featuring interviews and observational footage of children from around the world at an international school in New York City (McCarthy, 2009). This program was one of, if not the first, of its kind, and drew high praise from media critics. McCarthy quoted Charles Siepmann, a professor of television studies at New York University, in his review of Funt’s program: “I come more and more to think that TV’s forte is as it plays on life and that...the make believe of drama strains the psychological and physical dimensions of the TV screen” (Siepmann, as quoted in McCarthy, 2009, p. 23). Written in 1954, before *Candid Camera*, the popularity of this show suggests the demand for unscripted programming.

Funt’s lasting contribution to this genre is *Candid Camera*. Started in 1946 as a radio show called *Candid Microphone* (Slocum, 2011), Funt moved his program to television in 1948 and its longest run was on CBS from 1960-1967 (McCarthy, 2009). This show provided a new way of thinking about television in the postwar period. Never before had audience members been able to see people on television acting in an authentic manner. The audience could put themselves squarely in the shoes of the (unwitting) participants of the show, because they were not actors. It would be fair to say that *Candid Camera* was more than a television program, it

was a cultural phenomenon “Even as critics condemned his work as an invasion of privacy, many agreed with sociologist David Riesman’s assessment of Funt as the ‘second most ingenious sociologist in America’ (after Paul Lazarsfeld)” (McCarthy, 2009, p. 25). In 1962, when the show entered prime time, a thematic shakeup occurred. The program hired a writer, William Saroyan, to create sketches that could be used in the show. McCarthy (2009) explained that “Funt would then try to duplicate the social situations Saroyan created in his interactions with people on the street” (p. 32). This resulted in the skeleton of today’s reality show: real people are put into social situations created by the show’s writers and producers.

In this first wave of reality television, several series followed in the footsteps of *Candid Camera*. Some might not call these true reality shows in the mold of what we have today, but they were a precursor to today’s reality TV. Due to these shows, the thought that non-actors could be used to carry a television program became accepted. According to Slocum (2011): “*Truth or Consequences* started in 1950, and frequently used secret cameras” (p. 1). In the same vein of using non-actors as the main characters, several “Who Am I?” type shows emerged in the 1950s, including “*What’s My Line* in 1950, *I’ve Got a Secret* in 1952, and *To Tell the Truth* in 1956” (Slocum, 2011, p. 1). All of these programs had long runs in prime time on network stations, indicating the popularity of this genre.

The next important step in reality television’s history took place in 1973, with the premiere of the PBS reality show *An American Family*. Ebersole and Woods (2007) explained that this 12-hour documentary series was “...the first television program to peer into the lives of ordinary people” (p. 23). Murray (2009) described the series:

Shooting with handheld cameras, a film crew follows the everyday happenings and interpersonal relationships of an upper-middle-class California family for seven months. Television viewers have a ‘fly on the wall’ perspective as they engage in heated political debates at the dinner table, frequent neighborhood dinner parties, struggle with internal and external conflicts, take vacations, work and attend high school. (p. 65)

This format is instantly recognizable to today's television viewer. This type of program has been made several times with famous families in contemporary times, including MTV's *The Osbournes* and E!'s *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. However, when PBS first broadcast *An American Family*, the public, according to Murray (2009) was "...so befuddled...that they ended up comparing it to everything from home movies to situation comedies" (p. 65). In fact, anthropologist Margaret Mead remarked to *TV Guide*:

I do not think that *American Family* should be called a documentary. I think we need a new name for it, a name that would contrast it not only with fiction, but with what we have been exposed to up until now on TV. (Murray, 2009, p. 66)

This show pushed the documentary format beyond its usual bounds. In exposing sensational family secrets such as the divorce of the parents and the son's coming out as a homosexual, this show was shocking in its time period (Slocum, 2011).

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the camera move out of the studio, capturing people in their real-life settings. This path was paved by television news, which had shown the ease and importance of on-location filming. Additionally, "The introduction of RCA's TK-76 camera by 1976 made portable video affordable for every television station" (Slocum, 2011, p. 1). On the back of this technology, five television programs premiered in the late 1980s that brought the genre into the forefront of the television landscape: "*Unsolved Mysteries* premiered in 1987, *America's Most Wanted* in 1988, and both *Rescue 911* and *Cops* in 1989. *America's Funniest Home Videos* added a homemade variation in 1990" (Slocum, 2011, p. 1). These shows increased viewers' awareness of reality television, as real-life drama and comedy unfolded on living room TV screens. Fishman and Cavender (1998) explained how crime shows like *Unsolved Mysteries*, *America's Most Wanted*, *Rescue 911*, and *Cops* integrated into the already-existing crime television genre by using celebrity hosts, such as Raymond Burr, who were already famous from

other crime television shows such as *Perry Mason*. This led audiences smoothly from one program to another, and moved reality television further to the front of the TV landscape.

The next milestone in reality television is what most people would describe as the beginning of the modern age of this genre: *The Real World*. MTV's oldest still-running program, *The Real World* debuted in 1992 and has completed 22 seasons. At this time, it is under contract for three more and is one of the longest-running television shows in American history (Kraszewski, 2010). The introduction to the show sums it up best, and could probably be recited by most young adults who have grown up with the show: "This is the true story of seven strangers picked to live in a house and have their lives taped. Find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real" (www.tv.com/shows/the-real-world/). This show is the cornerstone of all current reality television, as Slocum (2011) explained:

The Real World moved the format ahead by staging an environment in which "reality" could occur in 1992. That landmark series married the secret cameras and setups of *Candid Camera*, to the explorative impulse of *You Asked For It*, to the personal revelations of *What's My Line*, to the technology of *Evening Magazine*, to the voyeuristic appeal of *An American Family* and *Cops*. The combination of techniques resulted in a format that is more structured and crafted than any that had come before. The premise comes in the architecture and the choice of city; the character creation comes in the casting; the storyline creation comes in the confessional interviewing, the choice of who and what to tape and the editing. The wide range of reality television series that we recognize today followed. (p. 1)

The Real World integrated all the most compelling factors of previous reality shows and presented them to the MTV audience, an audience that was ready for this type of programming.

Oullette and Hay (2008) explained that:

MTV was the first channel in the United States (and the world) designed primarily for young audiences, and both series [*Real World* and *Road Rules*] were integral to MTV's transformation away from predominantly music-video programming in the 1980s to lifestyle programming during the 1990s. (p. 191)

After this landmark program came others, most notably *Big Brother*, a fly-on-the-wall UK program, and *Survivor*, a challenge-based US program (Ebersole and Woods, 2007).

Both of these programs, along with *The Real World*, can be categorized as “documentary as diversion” (Corner, 2002), in that they are programs wherein real people are put into a predetermined situation and their reactions are filmed. Corner details this type of programming: “...the primary viewing activity is on looking and overhearing, perhaps aligned to events by intermittent commentary” (2002, p. 260). Documentary as diversion, then, describes many popular reality shows of this time. Shows like *Jersey Shore*, *The Bachelor*, and *Teen Mom* all fall into this category, as do many others. *Survivor* and *Big Brother* merit further discussion as they are two of the most influential series in reality TV history (Ebersole and Woods, 2007).

Survivor premiered in 2000 on CBS. As of now, the show has completed 22 seasons and is renewed for a 23rd and 24th (Marsi, 2011). The program is similar to *The Real World* in that it places a number of strangers in a situation and forces them to interact. However, the draw of *Survivor* is the location and the challenges. Each season of *Survivor* is set in a deserted and remote location, and the contestants must find food, water, and shelter for themselves, while simultaneously competing in challenges in order to not be eliminated. The final contestant who survives the elimination wins the season and a \$1 million cash prize. This is an extremely successful program model, because it shows non-actors (to whom the audience can relate) interacting in team-oriented exercises that are designed to eliminate weak links. Oullette and Hay explained:

Considered as a game of teamwork and group governance, *Survivor* has been one of the most recognizable and durable examples of demonstrating that good, active, and effective citizenship (being a useful member of a team, and even upholding the team’s reputation or honor) requires maximum degrees of self-sufficiency – by the individual contestants and teams. (2008, p. 185)

Through the use of remote locations and challenges designed to test both mental and physical capacities, *Survivor* has become one of the most popular reality shows of the modern era, and has influenced the creation of various other reality shows (Ebersole and Woods, 2007).

In terms of popularity, it would be fair to say that *Big Brother* is to the UK what *Survivor* is to the United States. This show was also launched in 2000, and blends aspects from *The Real World* and *Survivor*. People are chosen to live in a house together and to have their lives taped, just as in MTV's series. The *Survivor* element comes from the challenges that contestants are given, the outcomes of which may determine receipt of important basic needs (Corner, 2002). For example, a challenge winner may get extra money to spend on groceries for that week, while a loser may receive a minimal amount of grocery money. In a departure from *Survivor*, contestants are voted off by the audience until one remains as a winner. Corner (2002) explained that this program has become influential because it eventually brings out the "true selves" of the contestants.

One might use the term 'selving' to describe the central process whereby 'true selves' are seen to emerge (and develop) from underneath and, indeed, through, the 'performed selves' projected for us, as a consequence of the applied pressures of objective circumstance and group dynamics. (Corner, 2002, p. 261)

Through intense scrutiny and 24/7 filming, along with confessional style interviews (wherein one contestant talks to the camera at a time), a contestant's true self begins to emerge. *The Real World* and *Survivor* also use confessional interviews, with similar results. *Big Brother* is nothing more than a large-scale social experiment, and the viewing experience is a para-social interaction in which we watch as the contestants interact on a day-to-day basis (Corner, 2002).

Another set of reality television programs that have recent popular iterations is the talent show. With shows like *American Idol*, *Dancing With the Stars*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *The Sing-Off*, and *X Factor*, it is clear that this type of reality program is flourishing (Stelter, 2011). The roots of this branch of the reality TV tree can be traced back to radio. "Both Ted Mack and the *Original Amateur Hour* and *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts* began on radio and appeared on television in 1948" (Slocum, 2011, p. 1). He explains that "The pure talent show

genre persisted in the form of *Star Search* (1983)”, a program upon which countless future stars competed, such as Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears, Beyonce Knowles, Jessica Simpson, and LeAnn Rimes (Slocum, 2011, p. 1). These shows are popular in part because they showcase an everyday person rising to stardom. Recent technological innovations have allowed fans of these shows more access to the voting and results than ever before, which only ratchets up the programs’ popularity.

Reality television has moved into a strong position in the center of our television culture. From its earliest programs of *Candid Camera* and *Truth or Consequences*, up through the first fly-on-the-wall documentary *An American Family*, and into the present day with the post-*Real World* explosion, the genre is growing by the day. It will be instructive to look at some main reasons for the surge in popularity of reality TV.

Factors in Reality TV’s Popularity

Reality television has gained a strong foothold in our culture. The range of channels that offer reality programming cuts across all sections of the TV landscape: from home improvement (*Designed to Sell*, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*), to pawn-shop ownership (*Pawn Stars*, *Hardcore Pawn*), to professional sports tryouts (*Big Break: Ireland*, *4th and Long*). This genre contains such a diversity of programming for a number of reasons. The draw of fame is strong, the shows can be produced in a cost-effective way, and it has been found that audiences enjoy passing judgment on the ‘reality’ of these programs (Andrejevic, 2009).

Reality TV is extremely pervasive in today’s television programming. The *Kansas City Star*’s Aaron Barnhart explained the glut of reality now available: “In 2001 reality shows of all kinds accounted for 20 percent of TV’s prime-time schedule; today they account for about 40 percent” (2010, p. 2). This surge in reality TV indicates high audience interest in the genre, and

a reason for this is that many fans are drawn in by the thought that the shows they are watching are comprised of people exactly like them. Barnhart explained: “Reality TV has given thousands of people a small piece of celebrity and gotten millions of others dreaming of it. In a 2007 poll, 51 percent of 18-to-25-year-olds said that a primary goal was to ‘get famous’” (2010, p. 2). As audience members continue to watch these shows, the pull of fame will likely increase. In addition, as more reality shows come into existence, the stardom gained from being a cast member becomes legitimized. Nick Couldry explained: “Being in the *Big Brother* house is somehow *more significant* than being outside the house. In other words, mediated reality is somehow ‘higher’ than, or more significant than, nonmediated reality” (2009, p. 86). He went on to describe a scenario where the celebrity host of *Big Brother*, upon interviewing the winner of season 3, was star-struck because of the fame that the cast member had accrued during the show (2009). This shows that the allure of becoming a star is grounded in fact: many reality show cast members become stars in their own right. Omarosa, one of the contestants on the 2004 season of *The Apprentice*, is the classic example. In this excerpt from her personal website, we see the level of stardom attained simply from being a contestant on a reality program: “Omarosa has appeared on every major talk show including *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Dr. Phil Show*, *The Today Show*, *The Tonight Show*...” (Omarosa Official Website, 2009, p. 1). While everyone may not aspire to be reality TV’s next villain, they all strive for that level of fame.

Reality TV has become a dominant genre in the television field, and broadcasters looking for a profit have turned to it en masse. One reason for this is that it is very inexpensive to produce. Barnhart (2010) pointed out some startling facts: an hour of primetime, scripted entertainment on NBC can exceed \$3 million per episode in production costs. A reality show in this same time slot and network costs NBC less than \$1 million dollars per hour. The numbers

are even more striking when you move from network to cable: a scripted cable show can cost over \$2 million per episode, and “You can still make a good hour of unscripted for \$300,000 to \$500,000”, according to “John Ford, who has held top positions with TLC, Discovery, and National Geographic Channel” (Barnhart, 2010, p. 1). These numbers indicate that reality TV is a winning formula for any producer. Even PBS, the corporation created for the sole purpose of educating the public, has “experimented with the popular reality show in order to bolster ratings” (Oullette, 2010, p. 4). With costs as low as this, it is no wonder that almost every TV network has entertained thoughts of a reality show.

Another reason why reality TV is popular is that many audience members seem to enjoy the feeling of auditing a show for authenticity. Hill (2009) defined reality show authenticity as offering “...viewers a true and unmanipulated window onto the lives and characters of real people” (p. 591). This highlighted what audiences look for when they examine a reality show. In their paper *Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity Through Reality Television*, Rose and Wood paralleled the authenticity that a viewer desires in their reality television with that of an art collector: “Thus, consumers increasingly value authenticity in a world where the mass production of artifacts causes them to question the plausibility of the value” (2005, p. 286). As the realm of art and music becomes increasingly commercialized, there has emerged a demand for products that exist for the simple pleasure of the art, not created to gain wealth. This relates to reality TV, as viewers may want to see people on television acting naturally, not playing up for the cameras or trying to trick the audience. A participant in Rose and Wood’s study explains this: ““If I’d found out halfway through that *Survivor* was scripted, I wouldn’t have any interest in watching it... That’s sort of the idea. That’s why I think these reality shows are so interesting compared to a scripted show”” (2005, p. 293). This participant was discussing how it was easy to

see herself in the shoes of the participants on the show because the show was unscripted. This is the dynamic that reality TV audiences may be searching for.

Many reality shows could be labeled “documentary as diversion” (Corner, 2002). Corner stated that such a documentary is “A vehicle variously for the high-intensity incident (the reconstructed accident, the police raid), for anecdotal knowledge (gossipy first-person accounts), and for snoop sociability (as an amused bystander to the mixture of mess and routine in other people’s working lives)” (2002, p. 260). Most of these shows are scripted to some extent, and viewers know this fact. Rose and Wood explained:

We find... that reality programming is viewed as a mix of authentic and inauthentic elements. However, satisfying authenticity is a function of successfully negotiating the paradoxes inherent in the genre – a reconciliation of the tensions between what is subjectively real and fantastic. (2005, p. 287-288)

Viewers enjoy discussing how true-to-life the cast members are acting. Andrejevic illustrated this point: “There is also a certain pleasure to be derived from the performance of the savvy subject – the one who isn’t taken in by the performance of others, who insists for all to see that he or she ‘gets it’ (2009, p. 322). Corner (2002), strengthened this point by saying that in many documentary as diversion programs, “...belief in the veracity of what you are watching is not a prerequisite to engagement and pleasure. Indeed, quite the reverse rule would seem to apply” (p. 264). Andrejevic explained that viewers enjoy watching reality TV and simultaneously “displaying themselves as ‘unduped’ by appearances.” Thus, the “pleasure of voyeurism and that of self-display...are intertwined” (2009, p. 325). Audiences enjoy feeling smart. They want to show their peers that they are too savvy for these television programs, and they can judge for themselves what is real and what isn’t. Crew corroborated this in his article *Viewer Interpretations of Reality Television: How Real is Survivor for Its Viewers?* A focus group member discussed the relative reality of the mock-reality show *The Joe Schmo Show*: “‘They

kind of had a script, a loose script...But it wasn't the same [as *Survivor*], because – it wasn't just that we knew it was fake, a fake reality show, but because it *was* [fake]” (2006, p. 69). This audience member was concerned with making it known that he understood the concept of this program. The show was a take-off on all reality shows in that everyone on the show except the main character was an actor, and the audience member echoed this in his statement (Crew, 2006). Jonathan Gray examined an online post from a person who knew two contestants on the MTV reality show *Parental Control*. The poster said it was interesting to see how contrived the show really was, because the producers picked everything from the house the family lived in to the issues that they fought about (Gray, 2009). Gray writes: “Assuming that this poster is telling the truth, s/he proves that the show is scripted from beginning to end...However, equally telling is that nobody on the discussion board responds with either disappointment or surprise” (2009, p. 273). Thus, *Parental Control* is known to fall far towards the scripted end of the spectrum of reality TV, and this fact is reflected in the audience discussion.

Background to the Problem: the Effects of TV on Audiences

Life is full of stimuli, and these stimuli often elicit a reaction. If it is raining out, you might choose to wear a raincoat. If you are hungry, you might choose to eat a snack. If you read a book, you might be influenced by the ideas in that book. The degree of these influences varies, but the influence will exist. Today, we are exposed to more messages per day than ever before. According to a 2006 *USA Today* article: “The average 1970s city dweller was exposed to 500 to 2,000 ad messages a day... Now, it's 3,000 to 5,000” (Petrecca, 2006, p. 1) This statistic encompasses advertising messages that we are exposed to on a regular basis, and does not take into account content messages of programming, but it sheds some light on just how many

messages a person is exposed to in a given day. This in turn illuminates how many potential influences an audience member deals with on a day to day basis.

George Gerbner discussed how much of the oral tradition of passing along history and storytelling has been supplanted by technological innovations. The Industrial Revolution, he posited, was the beginning of the “Industrialization of storytelling, arguably the most profound transformation in the human process” (1998, p. 2). As cultural texts came to be written, Gerbner explained how for the first time in human history, “publics” could exist. These are “Loose aggregations of people who share some common consciousness of how things work, what things are, and what ought to be done – but never meet face to face” (1998, p. 2-3). As books and other printed materials could be transported easily, world knowledge increased and the tradition of mediated texts as cultural influences expanded greatly.

Surpassing the Industrial Revolution in terms of sheer information availability, was the Telecommunications Revolution. The introductions of the telephone in 1876 by Alexander Graham Bell (“Bell’s Telephone”, n.d.), the radio in 1907 by Guglielmo Marconi (Vujovic, 1998), and the television in 1927 by Philo Farnsworth (Postman, 1999, p. 2), were three of the most influential inventions in human history. Each successive invention effectively shrunk the world. Telephones allowed word of mouth discussion with people down the street or thousands of miles distant. Radio broke free from the constraints of wired service to broadcast to anyone, anywhere in the vicinity with an antenna. Television, however, was by far the most influential of the three. According to Gerbner:

Television is a centralized system of storytelling. Its drama, commercials, news, and other programs bring a relatively coherent system of images and messages into every home. That system cultivates from infancy the predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other ‘primary’ sources and that are so important in research in other media. (3)

With the extraordinary television saturation in the U.S. and the enormous number of messages that we are exposed to, it is no wonder that TV has replaced other modes of communication as the largest provider of messages to our society. Indeed, Sayre and King quoted Goldhaber's assertion that the era in which we live can be termed "the attention economy" (Goldhaber, as quoted in Sayre and King, 2003, p. 18). He believes the wealth of information at our fingertips only increases the competition for the audience's attention (Goldhaber, as quoted in Sayre and King, 2003). With so many messages competing for the audience's attention, it is important to look at the effects that these messages can have upon audiences.

Sayre and King (2003) classified the effects that television has on audiences into three categories: psychological, behavioral, and physiological. They examined different media effects paradigms, which have shifted as new research has emerged on the topic. The paradigm that dominated the media effects landscape until the middle of the 20th century, known as the "powerful effects" or "mass society" paradigm, contended that "The media are all powerful and that the average person is defenseless against this influence" (Sayre and King, 2003, p. 98). This paradigm was contemporary with the rise of the current mass media, and showed that the audience did not have the power to think critically and question what they read, heard, and saw. This paradigm did not last, however, instead shifting into the paradigm called "limited effects" theories (Sayre and King, 2003). These theories believe that "The media can have psychological, physical, and physiological effects on their audiences", but "These effects were argued to be 'limited' by many factors" (Sayre and King, 2003, p. 99). This ushered in a new era of media effects theories, one where audiences were seen to have realistic faculties of reason and to not be brainwashed by every message they encountered.

With the dawn of the 21st century, we find ourselves firmly entrenched in the limited effects paradigm. There are academic studies detailing the effects that television has on audiences, mainly dealing with specific and measurable impacts that television has had on the viewer. For example, Yang and Oliver (2010) found evidence that American television may have an impact upon consumers' financial self-viewpoint. They stated that: "Heavy television viewing may be associated with material value, estimates of other people's affluence, and perceived gaps between the self and others in material affluence" (Yang and Oliver, 2010, p. 118-119). This study revealed how heavy television viewing may cause audiences to focus on material wealth when evaluating another person. This is an example of a specific effect that television may have upon an audience.

A second example of this phenomenon comes from a 2010 Moyer-Guse and Nabi study, which found that some production techniques may significantly decrease, and even reverse, an audience's resistance to persuasion. They stated that:

The dramatic narrative reduced reactance by fostering parasocial interaction with characters and decreasing perceptions of persuasive intent. Also as expected, identification with characters in the narrative reduced counterarguing and increased perceived vulnerability. (Moyer-Guse and Nabi, 2010, p. 26)

Based upon the style of the filming and presentation, audiences may be convinced to accept the content of a message. In this instance, the technique of using a dramatic narrative in a television program about teen pregnancy served to convince the audience to put more of their faith into this show (Moyer-Guse and Nabi, 2010). Furthermore, it was found in a 2009 study that for high-schoolers, "Viewing late-night TV and local TV news had a positive, significant effect on civic participation" (Hoffman & Thompson, 2009, p. 3). Although the rate of civic participation is declining amongst adults, this study showed that the television that adolescents are watching is giving them an impetus to engage in the democratic process. The first two examples illustrate

psychological effects of television, while the third example brings to light a positive behavioral influence that television has caused.

As with other television genres, reality TV has behavioral and psychological effects on its audience. This research attempted to decipher whether or not these effects are indicative in any way of a societal change. This idea will deal with the concept of television as either a reflection or a criticism of society. Societal criticism generally results in change, while reflection does not. George Clooney, speaking of his film “The Ides of March”, explains:

Films don't lead the way. In general it takes about two years to get a film made...People think that films somehow are trying to lead society. Mostly we're reflecting the moods and thoughts that are going on in our country and around the world. (Clooney, as quoted in Ehrbar, 2011, p. 1)

This illustrates how the film industry does not have the flexibility, in Clooney's mind, to lead the social psyche. It is more difficult for film to capture a zeitgeist. Television, and especially reality television, may be a better medium through which to influence society.

Research Question

What effects do reality television programs exert on their audiences? Further, do these effects indicate that reality TV is functioning as an agent of societal change?

Theoretical Framework

This examination will be conducted using two theories in order to investigate reality television's effects. The first of these, called social cognitive theory, encompasses reality television's behavioral effects. Social cognitive is a limited effects theory first posited by Albert Bandura. It proposes that people model the behaviors they see in the mass media (Sayre and King, 2003, p. 109). This was originally called social learning theory. This theory posits that people can learn behaviors from what they watch on television just as easily as they can learn them from watching someone in real life (Bandura, 2001). Bandura explains that people perceive

their environment and internally create symbols, which help the person categorize their perceptions. “It is with symbols that people process and transform transient experiences into cognitive models that serve as guides for judgment and action. Through symbols, people give meaning, form, and continuity to their experiences” (Bandura, 2001, p. 267). This modeling may occur in two ways: imitation and identification. Imitation, according to Sayre and King, occurs when “Individuals directly replicate behavior they observe in the media”, while identification occurs when “Individuals do not directly replicate behavior, but they behave in ways that reflect related, generalized responses” (2003, p. 109). These modeling behaviors, if found to be significant effects of reality TV, could indicate a societal change. While this theory will serve as a guide in investigating how audiences act in light of their viewing of reality television, another theory is needed to examine the psychological effects of this genre.

The second theory upon which this paper will be based is social construction of reality. Sayre and King explained that “This theory argues that people who share a culture also share an ‘ongoing correspondence’ of meaning” (2003, p. 116). This correspondence is ever-evolving, and thus will be influenced heavily by what happens in the mass media. According to social construction of reality, the social consciousness understands objects in one of two ways: as symbols or as signs. Symbols possess an objective meaning that everyone understands. An example of this would be a stop sign. Signs possess a different, and more subjective, layer of meaning (Sayre and King, 2003). Sayre and King illustrated a helpful example: “A car may be a symbol of transportation, but a BMW or a Ferrari is a sign of wealth or success” (2003, p. 117). While this example seems to be pulled from everyday life, the exact same reasoning can be applied when looking at this theory from a media effects perspective. Sayre and King explained:

Research on the social construction of reality tends to rely on qualitative data analysis, where media content or entertainment experiences are subjectively analyzed and compared with societal trends and perceptions. For example, what do politicians mean

when they say they are going to ‘get tough on crime’? The meaning of this statement is shaped for both the politicians and the voters by their previous experiences. For many people, crime signifies (is a sign for) gangs, drugs, and violence...Most of what people know about crime comes from what we have read or seen in news media or on television programs or in the movies. (2003, p. 117)

This line of media effects reasoning looks at the longer-term influences on the audience’s psyche. Because of this, social construction of reality theory will be a useful lens through which to examine the question of reality TV’s effects on society.

Rationale

This research was undertaken in order to understand the role of reality TV as a possible agent of societal change. The proliferation of reality television programming has already been illustrated, and this warrants academic study. Anything that occupies such a large space in culture deserves to be studied, in order to find out how it has come to inhabit this space and what its possible cultural ramifications are.

One reason this topic ought to be studied is that, according to Sayre and King, “The media are often accused of encouraging *stereotyping*, or the application of a standardized image or concept to members of a certain group, usually based on limited information” (2003, p. 121). If an audience member repeatedly sees the same type of TV character being portrayed the same way, he/she may begin to believe this is an accurate, or authentic, representation of this type of person in the real world. Sayre and King go on to relate this concept of stereotyping directly to the genre of reality TV: “The...entertainment media present only a slice of life, but that slice is not necessarily representative of real life. Mundane, normal, everyday people and events typically are just not all that interesting or entertaining” (Sayre and King, 2003, p. 121). While many reality TV shows, and particularly “documentary as diversion” shows such as *Big Brother* and *The Real World* claim to show their participants acting in an authentic manner, oftentimes the producers behind these shows work to make the situations as interesting for the audience as

possible. Thus, the audience thinks they are watching reality unscripted when in reality they are seeing something far different.

Bearing this idea of stereotyping in mind, it is important to note that reality television has been proposed to be a model for how audiences act. This idea is directly related to Bandura's social cognitive theory, wherein audiences model the behaviors they see on television in their own lives. Reality TV takes this a step further in some cases, however, as shows actually give audiences a plan of action in order to help them change. Weber (2009) shows how makeover programs propagate this phenomenon:

The project of citizenship imagined across the makeover genre comes deeply saturated with Americanness and this, in turn, imports neoliberal ideologies, which position the subject as an entrepreneur of the self, who does and, indeed, must engage in care of the body and its symbolic referents in order to be competitive within a larger global marketplace. (Weber, 2009, p. 38-39).

These programs encourage audience members to model the behaviors they see on television. Audiences have been found to do exactly this in studies ranging across the spectrum of reality TV topics: from body image enhancement (Nabi, 2009), to home improvement (Winslow 2010), to dating (Ferris et al. 2007). In these studies, significant correlations have been demonstrated between the viewing of a reality television program of a certain type and the attitudes and actions of the viewers. It is my intention to see if this phenomenon is generally true because, if so, it would indicate a large-scale cultural impact. Reality TV programs would be shown to be highly influential in both behavioral and attitudinal sectors of our society, and perhaps a far more powerful force than we now suspect.

Review of the Literature

From its beginnings, television has been thought of as a medium capable of widespread cultural influence. Winslow uses a quote from the biography of the inventor of the television,

Philo Farnsworth, in which Farnsworth stated: “‘Television could become the world’s greatest teaching tool’” (Farnsworth as quoted in Winslow, 2010, p. 268). Sayre and King described television upon its arrival in American homes in the 1950s: “This window to the outside world brought information, amusement, and stories that fascinated young and old alike” (2003, p. 220). A few pages later, they also described a typical day in the life of a television audience member:

We begin our day with news and perhaps leave the TV on for background noise as we do household chores. During the day we discuss what we watched, and in the evening we tune in to our favorite sitcom and finish the day with David Letterman or Jay Leno. On weekends we watch movie channels and sports. Our lives often revolve around TV. By bringing the world into our homes, television has changed the way the world uses media. (Sayre and King, 2003, p. 236)

The pervasiveness of television is an indication of a major cultural shift. Before the 1950s, radio and print were the primary modes of mass communication, and were seen to be far less influential than television (Sayre and King, 2003). In the typical day described above, it is easy to imagine a viewer being swayed by some of the messages he/she encounters.

Factors in Reality TV’s Influence

Reality television attempts to depict the “authentic”, and viewers appreciate this. Van Bauwel and Carpentier explained the link between the format of reality TV and the audience:

Reality TV offers a valuable entry point into the trans-reality configuration as it explores authenticity and makes strong claims about reality, which often are connected to a celebration of ‘real’ people, the reality of everyday life and a new participatory relationship between viewer(s) and screen. (Van Bauwel and Carpentier, 2010, p. 6)

As the “real people” described in this quote are seen to inhabit the most popular television programs, the audience becomes more and more susceptible to the messages of these programs. This is due to the “Western societal preoccupations with reality, the truth, the visual, and the real” (Van Bauwel, 2010, p. 23). Starting in the 1980s, Van Bauwel explained that this discourse on the reality of what is being watched is culturally significant now more than ever. Ebersole and Woods (2007) explained that “Reality TV’s intentional blurring of genres, inclusion of audience

participation and control in the outcome, and ability to present raw, authentic footage all work to extend previous assumptions about the role television plays in individuals' lives" (p. 26). This indicates that reality television plays an ever more prominent role in the lives of its audiences. Reality TV now precipitates some action or response from its viewers. Several examples of this might include the possibility of learning new recipes from a cooking show, voting on a contestant's fate in a competition-style show, or perhaps using style or relationship advice from a reality show in your own life. These audience responses may point to the influence that this genre has.

Many articles have been written about the specific effects that reality television has on its audiences (Nabi, 2009; Winslow, 2010; Kraszewski, 2010; Leone, Peek, and Bissell 2006; Oullette, 2010; Andrejevic, 2002). One example of this is *The Content of Reality Dating Shows and Viewer Perceptions of Dating* (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007), which dealt with the correlations between the content of reality dating shows and "actual dating attitudes, preferred date characteristics, and dating behaviors of viewers of that genre" (Ferris et al., 2007, p. 490). This study used the limited effects paradigm to explore the effects of reality TV viewership upon audiences.

This study employed two methods of data collection. Content analysis was used "To identify the specific dating attitudes, characteristics, and behaviors portrayed on reality dating shows", and survey research was used "to determine if those significant content elements identified are endorsed or enacted more often by heavier viewers of that genre" (Ferris et al., 2007, p. 493).

Some of the results included the following. "Men, those who perceived the shows as more realistic, and those who viewed more reality dating shows were significantly more likely to

endorse the attitudes that men are sex-driven and that women are sexual objects” (Ferris et al., 2007, p. 504). Additionally, “Results indicate that endorsement of only two of nine behaviors likely to occur on an early date were significantly related to viewing of reality dating programs: drinking alcohol...and getting in a hot tub or spa” (Ferris et al., 2007, p. 504). While the authors’ first hypothesis about the correlation between the predictors and the advancement of the attitudes was upheld, their third hypothesis that “Viewing of reality dating programs would be positively related to the likelihood of endorsing behaviors frequently portrayed on reality dating shows on an early date” was only substantiated in two instances (Ferris et al., 2007, p. 504). Their second hypothesis, that there would exist a “positive correlation between reality dating show viewing and the importance of dating characteristics featured prominently on reality dating shows,” was not substantiated at all (Ferris et al., 2007, p. 504). This exploration of the effects on viewers of reality dating shows is interesting to consider. Looking for specific, measurable results, the authors conducted a quantitative study and found scientific evidence of reality TV’s influence on an audience.

Ferris, et al. (2007) took a quantitative approach to investigating the effects that reality TV has on its audiences. Oullette (2009) took a different approach in her paper “*Take Responsibility for Yourself: Judge Judy and the Neoliberal Citizen*.” Oullette examined the societal role played by Judge Judith Sheindlin on her daytime television show *Judge Judy*. The program takes real-life court cases from small-claims courts across the country and submits them to the private ruling of Judge Judy, a no-nonsense former New York family court judge (Oullette, 2009). Oullette relied on her own analysis of the program coupled with a document analysis from other scholarly sources.

Oullette (2009) explained that “Reality programming is one site where neoliberal approaches to citizenship have...materialized on television” (p. 224). Drawing on Rose (1996), Oullette (2009) defined neoliberalism as a system under which an individual is free to make decisions and has a high level of personal responsibility. Oullette explains: “This diffused approach to the ‘regulation of conduct’ escapes association with a clear or top-down agenda and is, instead, presented as the individual’s ‘own desire’ to achieve optimum happiness and success” (2009, p. 225). She stated that this system presumes that individuals have free will, so the happiness and success of a person is controlled largely by that person’s actions. Through this lens, Oullette situated *Judge Judy* as “A neoliberal technology of everyday citizenship” and described how “the show attempts to shape and guide the conduct and choices of lower-income women” (2009, p. 224). Situated as a reality courtroom show, *Judge Judy* is a teaching tool that has an effect on its audience.

In this paper, Oullette explained how *Judge Judy*, and other shows like it, influence their audiences. In general, she believed that these programs:

Supplant institutions of the state (social work, law and order, welfare offices) and, using real people caught in the drama of ordinary life as raw material, train TV viewers to function without state assistance or supervision, as self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible, and risk-averting individuals. (Oullette, 2009, p. 224)

Oullette believed these shows capable of much more than just filling up space on daytime television, indeed, she positioned them as active agents of societal change. She referenced Hay (2000), who explained that television is the perfect medium to advance the neoliberal agenda because it “...assumes that social subjects are not and should not be subject to direct forms of state control... therefore rely[ing] on mechanisms for governing at a distance” (Hay, in Oullette, 2009, p. 226). In a neoliberal society, direct mandates from the government are not how people learn and make decisions. This learning must take place in the social space, and must allow for

an individual to exercise his or her free will (Oullette, 2009). She went on to explain that “Popular reality television may be better suited to the indirect, diffuse mode of cultural governmentality that Hay describes” (2009, p. 226) because audiences can adapt the rulings they see on television to their own lives. Encapsulating her argument into a paragraph, Oullette described how *Judge Judy* and related programs could empower women in a postmodern society:

Judge Judy fuses television, neoliberalism, and self-help discourse in a governmental address to women...The program presents the privatized space of the simulated TV courtroom as the most ‘efficient’ way to resolve microdisputes...but it also classifies those individuals who ‘waste the court’s time’ as risky deviants and self-made victims who create their own misfortunes...The imagined TV viewer is the implied beneficiary of this parade of mistakes, for her classification as ‘normal’ hinges on recognizing the pathos of ‘others’ and internalizing the rules of self-governmnet spelled out on the program. (2009, p. 227)

This type of program is a key facet of the neoliberal culture. It empowers its audience to make correct choices, take responsibility for themselves and their families, and to refuse to be a victim. Judge Judy uses these lessons as she lectures the litigants on her show, but the audience at home is the real target for these ideas. With this format of real-life court cases brought before a judge for a final ruling, Judge Judy becomes a voice for morality and self-empowerment that her audience is encouraged to follow (Oullette, 2009).

Audience Desire for Authenticity

In some studies, audience effects are not so easily characterized. The studies previously mentioned exhibit specific, limited effects that are either behavioral or psychological, and usually are one-way. That is, the audience watches the show and receives the message which triggers an effect for them. This is not the only way that reality TV affects audiences, however. Many audience members carry on an internal conversation as they watch these shows, and search for authenticity in the programs. Andacht (2010) touched upon this point in his research, and Rose and Wood (2005) examined it in depth.

Rose and Wood's 2005 article, *Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity through Reality Television* explored how audiences come to terms with the "authenticity" of a reality television program. Echoing Van Bauwel's (2010) assertion that the current cultural trend focuses on the search for authenticity, Rose and Wood (2005) explained: "We position reality television within the broader category of consumer practices of authenticity seeking in a postmodern cultural context" (p. 284). This qualitative assessment focused on in-depth interviews with 15 reality television viewers. The authors assigned one of four reality shows to the participants, who were instructed to record their "thoughts, feelings, and experiences" while viewing these shows (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 287). Interviews with each participant were also used, as well as secondary data from the Internet and other media that discussed related themes.

Analysis of these data revealed that viewers who enjoyed the programs "were categorized by wondering. They wondered why the cast members acted or spoke as they did, they wondered what they would do if they were in the cast member's place, they wondered what the producers were 'up to'" (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 294). This wondering, say the authors, was an active discourse into the consumption of the authenticity of the program, as the audience members turned a critical eye towards the actions they see. Another finding from this study was that audience members differed in selecting the program elements that made the show feel authentic. For example: "Viewers were as likely to value contrivance or fantasy in the construction of a satisfyingly authentic experience as they were to rely on connections to their personal reality" (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 294). This indicated that viewers were not concerned with specific elements of authenticity, just that the text struck them as authentic. A second insight that this study revealed is concerned with the negotiation of paradoxes while watching reality TV. Rose and Wood said that the viewer valued the program according to how he/she interpreted these

paradoxes: “The degree of admiration accorded the reality television program depended on the viewer’s ability to reconcile paradoxes of identification (beautiful people vs. “people like me”), situation (common goals vs. uncommon surroundings), and production (unscripted vs. necessary manipulation)” (2005, p. 294). Rose and Wood found that viewers of reality TV occupied a utopian media space where they could blend “Indexical elements of programming that connect with their lived experiences and aspirations with fantastical or simulated elements that inspire their imaginations” (2005, p. 294). This study illustrated the ways that a fan creates an opinion on the authenticity of reality television.

Lifestyle Programs

There is a large portion of the reality TV market devoted to “lifestyle programs”, which are categorized by Lewis (2008) as “Instructing people as to how to manage their everyday lives – not only through ‘making over’ their home decor and their wardrobes but also through providing advice on health, interpersonal relationships, and, more recently, how to live ‘greener’ lives” (Lewis, 2008, p. 227). The academic field is replete with studies and books documenting this topic (Nabi, 2009; Winslow, 2010; Thomas, 2010; Bratich, 2007; Morris, 2007; Russell, 2007; Morreale, 2007; Gailey, 2007; Weber, 2009; Palmer, 2004). With this subset of the reality genre receiving so much academic attention, it is important to understand what effects this genre may have on audiences.

Redden (2007) explored the relationships between British lifestyle television programs and audience consumerism. He categorized these programs as being about “The modification of attitudes, behaviour, and lifestyle so as to enhance personal wellbeing to a putatively life-changing extent” (Redden, 2007, p. 150). Redden (2007) explained that these programs glorify consumerism and commodification as the means to achieve happiness. He explained: “The

shows project mentalities, ethics, and activities associated with consumption, depicting its value in terms of the lived experiences, and social interests, of ordinary contemporary persons” (Redden, 2007, p. 15). He sketched out the basic format for a lifestyle program and the main archetypal characters involved: “In this, the makeover reproduces a central tenet of commercialism, namely that consumption leads to improved life-experience” (Deery, 2004, as quoted in Redden, 2007, p. 152). To support this hypothesis, Redden drew on several examples from different lifestyle programs.

Some effects that Redden discovered from various lifestyle programs include the following. First, he explained how makeover programs such as *What Not to Wear* act as morality tales: “The whole thing is a kind of instructional fable in which her guardians exhort change towards a better state, in line with arguments about right and wrong, good and bad” (Redden, 2007, p. 153). He explained how this will show the viewers that with the right choices, they can have a fairytale ending as well. Another effect that Redden found is that “Makeovers such as *What Not to Wear* generate forms of class antagonism between women” (2007, p. 154). In this instance Redden explained that the experts on the show admonish the middle and lower classes for not having the sophisticated tastes of the upper class. This may cause middle and lower class audience members feel inferior. This, in turn, legitimizes the symbolic power that the upper classes have. A third effect discussed in this article was that the choices for one’s life are becoming less predetermined. Since all of these lifestyle and makeover shows are tailored towards the individuals receiving the action of the plot, the main message of these shows is that you must incorporate new style choices into your own preexisting life (Redden, 2007). Redden quoted Bauman (1993): “Being right no longer equates with following custom. Increasingly, people have to choose what is right in belief and action, while the grounds of right choice are not

socially enforced, but drawn from competing interpretations and traditions” (Bauman, as quoted in Redden, 2007, p. 157). This shows the increasing autonomy that lifestyle and makeover reality shows grant to audiences, as the cultural norms become more fragmented and less important in purchase decisions.

Theoretical Frameworks: Social Cognitive Theory and Social Construction of Reality in Literature

This study will examine reality TV through two lenses: social cognitive theory and social construction of reality. Social cognitive theory, first posited by Albert Bandura, proposes that people model what they see in mass media (Sayre and King, 2003). That is, an audience member will be influenced behaviorally by something that they witness on television or in the movies. Moyer-Guse and Nabi (2010) posited that social cognitive is “The most commonly applied theory in the area of entertainment-education” (28).

Nabi (2009) used social cognitive theory in her assessment of whether or not cosmetic surgery programs influenced the behavior and perceptions of their audiences. Nabi referenced Taveras et al. (2004) in finding that “Nearly half of all female adolescents and one-quarter of male adolescents altered their physical activity in an effort to look more like a same-sex media figure” (Taveras, in Nabi, 2009, p. 11). Using social cognitive as one of three theories in this study, she aimed to shed light on how audiences will physically react to a cosmetic surgery reality program. She believed that since social cognitive theory proposes that audiences will model behaviors that they see as receiving praise, there would be a correlation between watching cosmetic surgery programs and undergoing cosmetic surgery procedures (Nabi, 2009). Nabi’s third hypothesis in this study read: “Those with lower body satisfaction will (a) watch cosmetic surgery makeover programs more frequently, and (b) experience greater identification with the

program participants” (2009, p. 11). If these two statements were true, she expected this interaction to occur: “The more viewers identify with cosmetic surgery makeover program participants, the higher their expected likelihood of undergoing cosmetic enhancement will be, provided positive outcomes are perceived” (Nabi, 2009, p. 12). Adapting social cognitive theory to the world of makeover television, Nabi expected that audience members would see the rewards garnered by contestants on the shows who had undergone cosmetic surgery and wish to undergo similar operations. This modeling behavior strikes at the heart of this research, and if this is indeed a trend in our society, reality TV may be an agent of societal change.

Another theory that grounds this research is social construction of reality (Adoni and Mane 1984). This theory centers around the idea that that people who share a culture also share a common and ongoing correspondence of meaning (Sayre and King, 2003). Adoni and Mane (1984) explained that “The social construction of reality is a dialectical process in which human beings act as both the creators and as products in their social world” (p. 325). This cultural sharing gives additional layers of meaning that are unique to each culture, and informs the actions, responses, and psychological states of the people (Adoni and Mane, 1984).

Social construction of reality was the basis for Andacht’s discussion of “indexical signs of the real” (2010, p. 44). His article dealt with how audience members construct meaning from a mediated text, and he introduced the triadic model of representation (Andacht, 2010). This triadic model of representation dovetails with social construction of reality: “Besides the sign that we perceive and the object that it represents, there is still another sign which is generated in this process, namely, the interpretant” (2010, p. 45). The three parts in this triadic model are: the sign that we perceive, the object that it represents, and the interpretant. The author gave human perspiration as an example of a sign. This sign is connected to an object (the person who is

sweating). If this sweat is perceived by some other person, that perceiver is the interpretant, and makes meaning from this perception (i.e., the interpretant sees someone sweating and assumes they have just exercised) (Andacht, 2010). In this process, meaning is created by the interpretant, and thus the more widespread the message, the more culturally significant these interpretants are. Andacht gave some examples of interpretants as “the critical reviews of *Big Brother* and the opinions of the public about the TV show” (2010, p. 45), showing that this triadic representation model is indeed based on social construction of reality. Andacht, for instance, examined the Argentinian version of *Big Brother* in order to examine “the kind of indexically-based opinions (dynamical interpretants) that are the response to... indexical signs” (2010, p. 45). He found that audiences had begun to see one character in a sympathetic light. Tamara, an attractive blond female, began to cry every time she enters the confessional to nominate two candidates for eviction (Andacht, 2010). Because of this action, audience members stated sentiments like this about her: “‘But in the very end, I felt sorry for her’...’At every instant, she started to cry’...’She was crying all the time’” (Andacht, 2010, p. 45-46). The audiences seemed to view Tamara’s extreme unwillingness to cast a vote against her housemates, and use their cultural screens to interpret this to mean that she was a kindhearted person, and thus deserving of their sympathy. This concurrence of meaning illustrates the tenets of social construction of reality theory, as each audience member is psychologically affected by the reality program in a similar way.

The genre of reality television is entrenched in our media landscape, and has been extensively researched and carefully studied. Many theories have been used in this body of work. Using both social cognitive theory and social construction of reality, this paper will synthesize many different conclusions and findings from diverse scholarly works across the genre. This will

be done in order to understand whether or not reality TV affects its audience in such a way as to be considered an agent of societal change.

Methodology

This research was a meta-analysis, taking into account many different studies, papers, and articles in order to investigate whether or not reality television has a profound societal effect. My research was conducted exclusively through the network of the libraries at a major Northeast university, which will be referred to as Chestnut College. In addition to books available in the library, which I found through the online library catalog, I utilized scholarly, peer-reviewed articles gathered from the databases available through the online Chestnut College library system. These databases included, but were not limited to, *Communication Abstracts*, *Communication and Mass Media Complete*, *Academic OneFile*, *Illumina Social Sciences*, and *Sociological Abstracts*. Some of the key words I used to search for these articles include: TV, Televis*, Realit*, Effect*, Audienc*, Societ*, Affect*, MTV*, Cognit*, Construct*, Social*, and Theory*. These key words were augmented by others when necessary. In order to organize my research, I used codes when examining my sources, including: PAF= positive audience effects, NAF=negative audience effects, BEH=behavioral audience effects, PSY=psychological audience effects, SCT=social cognitive theory, SCR=social construction of reality. I used these codes to arrange the data into their different categories, so I could easily access this data.

Findings

Types of Reality Programs

In order to understand its audience effects, we must first look at the types of reality programming available. Researchers have found that audiences proffer examples of reality TV shows ranging across the spectrum: from *COPS* to *The Real World* (Hall, 2006), and *American*

Chopper to *The Swan* (Lundy, Ruth, Park, 2008). While many audience members categorize reality shows into examples, a more organized system is to break this genre into program types. For the purposes of this research, there will be two types of reality TV programs discussed: lifestyle programs and documentary as diversion programs.

One of the most common types of reality programming is the lifestyle program. These deal with the discussion, and often making over, of some aspect of a person's life, whether it is their body, face, home, car, or garden. Weber (2009) names thirty distinct reality TV programs that could be categorized under this heading in the first 2 pages of her book. She explains: "...U.S. television is inundating viewers with imperatives about self-appraisal, self-critique, and self-improvement" (Weber, 2009, p. 2).

Borrowing from Corner (2002), the second category of reality TV to be examined is documentary as diversion. This encompasses any reality program in which a cast is filmed, with their knowledge, for the entertainment purposes of the audience, performing what are purported to be authentic or unscripted actions. This cast could have been assembled from casting calls (such as in *The Real World* and *Jersey Shore*). On the other hand, many new documentary as diversion programs depict ways of life that had been occurring prior to being filmed, and were deemed interesting or novel enough to be given a television show (such as *Ice Road Truckers* and *Swamp People*) (Lackner, 2011). This genre also contains talent and contest shows such as *America's Best Dance Crew* and *American Idol* (Oullette, 2010). These programs, though not exactly in the documentary format that most people think of, depict real people performing and showcasing their talents. Corner (2002) explains this genre:

For it is clear that right at the heart of the series is the idea of observing what is a mode of "real" behavior. Such observation finds its grounding reference, and a large part of its interest and pleasure, in the real characteristics of real people, even if the material and temporal conditions for that behavior have been entirely constructed by television itself. (p. 256)

Thus, documentary as diversion is positioned as a look into the lives, or at least the thoughts and actions, of real people. It is within this category that we find the audience desire for authenticity.

These two categories are very broadly defined, in order to capture as much reality programming as possible. Used in concert with the two theories in this paper, this categorization will attempt to discern whether reality TV is being used as an instrument of societal change.

Behavioral Effects

Lifestyle Programs

Lifestyle programs have become a large part of the reality TV landscape, and they are making inroads into many different facets of life. Indeed, Weber (2009) discussed many different types of physical makeover, wardrobe change, and plastic surgery programs, and also expressed that “There are also a countless number of house, car, motorcycle, boat, restaurant, kid, marriage, salon, and manners makeovers that have set a new benchmark for televisual transformation” (Weber, 2009, p. 2). This covers a large number of reality programs, and these are only the shows dealing with makeovers. Lifestyle programming also contains dating programs, some health and wellness shows, and assorted other shows that help a person live a better life. This genre, then, is particularly audience-centered. Redden (2007) explained that one of the main themes of this type of program is that the participant, and therefore (hopefully) the audience, learns how to “...select and consume goods and services appropriately” (p. 150). With this in mind, let’s take a look at the behavioral influences enacted by this genre upon its audiences.

One of the main behavioral influences that lifestyle programs enact upon their audiences is modeling. Audiences may see what happens on a lifestyle television program, and model their behavior after this content. Nabi (2009) found that “Cosmetic surgery makeover program

viewing significantly and positively associated with likelihood of undergoing invasive...and minimally invasive procedures...though not noninvasive interventions” (p. 7). Furthermore, she concluded that “...there is evidence that viewing cosmetic surgery makeover programs may associate with a desire for a range of cosmetic enhancement procedures” (Nabi, 2009, p. 8). In the second part of this study, the researcher proposed this hypothesis:

H1: Greater consumption of cosmetic surgery makeover programs will associate with: (a) higher perceived societal prevalence of cosmetic enhancement procedures, and (b) a greater expressed likelihood of undergoing such procedures” and concluded thusly: “Indeed, cosmetic surgery makeover program viewing positively associated with all three measures of cosmetic enhancement...These results support H1b. (Nabi, 2009, p. 9)

One final finding from this study was that participants who exhibited greater levels of social comparison expressed high levels of likelihood of undergoing cosmetic procedures (Nabi, 2009). These findings show strong evidence for cosmetic surgery programs’ ability to behaviorally influence their audience.

Di Mattia (2007) discussed the cultural position of the makeover program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. She explained that this program, which deals with five homosexual males tasked with making over a heterosexual male and showing him “...what it means to be a man” (Di Mattia, 2007, p. 134). She explained that this program serves as a model for men to “...become better boyfriends or husbands in every area except the bedroom” (Di Mattia, 2007, p. 134). A part of this show teaches the makeover subject (and the audience) about how to be romantic for a girlfriend or wife. Di Mattia says: “With the help of the Fab 5 [the five experts on the show], straight men across America (and beyond) are learning the art of wooing women” (2007, p. 144). Redden (2007) also discussed this program, explaining how product placement on the show has led to enormous sales increases for the products shown to make men live better. This show is significant in that its behaviors are easily modeled by men hoping to better themselves.

Another example of modeling behaviors occurred in Palmer's 2007 discussion of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. He situated the ethics of care and community outreach within a Christian archetype of helping those less fortunate, and explained that viewers have even been moved to attempt their own makeovers. "Some other churches have set out on 'copy-cat' schemes in which members decorate or attempt mini-makeovers of their own" (Palmer, 2007, p. 170).

Redden (2007) also discussed how purchase decisions are an effect of lifestyle reality programming. While not exactly modeling the behaviors of the participants on the shows, this is nonetheless an important effect to consider. He referenced Hartley (1999) in saying that TV is the most important medium from which people draw notions of conduct. He explained that lifestyle programs create niche markets based upon the subject being made over in each episode. As audience members identify with these subjects, they become the program's focus (Redden, 2007). Furthermore, Redden explained that:

The life styling processes depicted represent the subject as 'doing the work' of the niche market in society by taking on the role of an active consumer, someone who is intent on developing their literacies to the levels of sophistication required so as to make personal order from a multitude of options. (2007, p. 162)

This induces the niche markets to make similar purchases to the ones onscreen, hoping for the same results.

Fraser (2007) dealt with purchase decisions as well. She gave a comprehensive history of how beauty products have been marketed to women during of the 20th century. Women, she contended, are part of an ever-revolving cycle of desire and consumption. If a woman wishes to be desired, she must first desire (and consume) products that make her desirable according to her culture (Fraser, 2007). She quoted Doane (1989), who has summed up the relationship between feminine subjectivity and commodity consumption:

Commodification presupposes that acutely self-conscious relation to the body, which is attributed to femininity. The effective operation of the commodity system requires the breakdown of the body into parts – nails, hair, skin, breath – each one of which can constantly be improved through the purchase of a commodity. (Doane, as quoted in Fraser, 2007, p. 183)

This sentiment is borne out in reality programs like *Extreme Makeover* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, where the only obstacle between audience members and a full makeover is capital (Fraser, 2007).

Through these two behaviors of modeling and purchase decisions, we begin to see that lifestyle reality television programs can have an effect on audience actions. This may be cognitively consistent, as both modeling and purchase decision seem like logical steps for an audience member to take. We turn our attention now to the other type of reality programming: documentary as diversion.

Documentary as Diversion

The documentary as diversion genre, for the purposes of this research, includes all reality shows in which a cast is filmed, with their knowledge, for the audience's entertainment, performing what are alleged to be authentic and/or unscripted actions. Corner describes this type of programming by its viewer actions: "...the primary viewing activity is on looking and overhearing, perhaps aligned to events by intermittent commentary" (2002, p. 260). Behavioral audience effects for this genre may be more difficult to measure than those of the lifestyle genre. Ouellette (2010), however, found that documentary as diversion programs retained many effects from their predecessor, the documentary. She explained: "Many of the functions ascribed to the documentary and the public service tradition in general – particularly citizenship training – have been radically reinterpreted and integrated into popular reality formats" (Ouellette, 2010, p. 68). While not going into specifics, she posited that reality shows:

...command an indirect and unofficial role in constituting, normalizing, educating, and training the self-empowering the citizens beckoned by political authorities. However artificial and staged these programs appear on the surface, they help to constitute powerful truths concerning appropriate forms of civic conduct and problem-solving. (Oullette, 2010, p. 68)

She situated reality programs as a sort of government unburdened by regulations, and one that can teach citizens lessons that they can enact in their lives (Oullette, 2010).

Ferris et al. (2007) explored the effects of reality dating shows on young adults. The researchers focused mostly on psychological effects in this study. However, there was evidence that viewing reality television correlated positively with two behaviors (drinking alcohol and using a hot tub) that respondents said they were likely to perform early in a dating relationship (Ferris et al., 2007). This conclusion illustrates that these reality programs exerted a measurable behavioral influence on the subjects of this study.

Hill (2005) discussed social learning as an effect of reality programs. She used the British program *Airport* as an example, as several of the subjects in her studies said that they enjoy "...watching everybody walk past" or "...see[ing] what other people do" (Hill, 2005, p. 98). Hill positioned these responses as a behavioral effect in that "...observation of social behaviour can be informative" (Hill, 2005, p. 98). Hill quoted Hartley (1999) in saying that "...television is a major source of people watching for comparison and possible emulation" (2005, p. 98). This is especially true of young viewers, who use these observations to form understandings of socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviors (Hill, 2005, p. 104). However, many adults who watch documentary as diversion programs deny that there is anything to learn. One of Hill's subjects rejected the idea of learning from the program *Big Brother*, and contended that the program "...might open some people's eyes that don't go out, maybe" (Hill, 2005, p. 99). Hill explained:

Her suggestion that the only people who might learn from watching *Big Brother* are people who don't get out much sums up a general feeling amongst audiences of reality programming that if you need to watch reality TV to learn about life then this implies you don't have a life outside of watching TV. (2005, p. 99)

Visible here is the age difference in behavioral effects from documentary as diversion programs.

While younger audiences may learn things about how to behave in a social setting, many adults would feel embarrassed to say that they learned something useful from one of these programs.

This concludes the behavioral effects findings. Seen through social cognitive theory, these effects are useful when determining whether or not reality TV is an agent of societal change.

Psychological Effects

Lifestyle Programs

Reality TV lends itself well to study through the social construction of reality approach. Bratich (2007) explained that reality television has altered television's "...organization and logic: its relation to everyday life, to audiences, and to the contexts from which it emerges" (p. 7). He continued: "RTV [reality television] does not *represent* the current conjecture – it interjects itself into the conjecture and enhances particular components required by it" (Bratich, 2007, p. 7). This recalls Adoni and Mane's (1984) definition of social construction of reality as a: "...dialectical process in which human beings act as both the creators and as products in their social world" (p. 325). Reality television, according to Bratich (2007), has entrenched itself into this culture and shifted the entire medium of television. Examination of several psychological effects of this genre follows.

Dover and Hill (2007) found that many viewers of British lifestyle television found themselves learning about their own culture. "What viewers claimed to learn about was a general

picture of British culture and society which, in relation to lifestyle programs, suggest learning about cultural patterns or trends in interior design, fashion, or self-improvement” (Dover and Hill, 2007, p. 35). Hill (2005) reinforced this statement. She said that audiences enjoy lifestyle reality programs “...precisely because these particular programmes offer narratives they can relate to” (p. 91). The concept of social learning through reality TV can be explained by social construction of reality: as audiences see different styles being portrayed positively on television, they will mold these styles into their personal lives.

Learning is a positive psychological effect that has been found to occur throughout several different studies of lifestyle reality programs. Hill (2005) referenced several different scholars (Corner, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Moores, 2000; Gauntlett, 2002) to make the point that “The media contributes to the construction of narratives of the self” (p. 90). Thus, audiences take what they see in the media and apply it to their lives. She used excerpts from focus group interviews with her subjects to illustrate this phenomenon with respect to lifestyle reality programs. One of her subjects said she watches the British program *999* to “...see what I can do in case of a fire, or, I break a leg, what first aid I could use, or stuff like that” (Hill, 2005, p. 91). Another of her subjects has learned from the British program *House of Horrors* to be more careful when selecting contractors to work on her home. She said: “...to me, what it’s saying is ‘I won’t get these deals from the paper anymore, I’ll get somebody who my mate knows who they can trust’” (Hill, 2005, p. 92). These examples of learning show a psychological effect, as the audience is now influenced by these programs and will take their teachings into account before they act.

Other examples of learning from lifestyle programs abound. Lewis (2008) found that lifestyle programs in Australia taught audiences about different cultures, foods, and

communities. Palmer (2004) posited that lifestyle programs could teach audiences ways to change themselves in order to appear of a higher or more distinguished social position. Stephens (2004) described how female audience members learn more from the TLC programs *A Wedding Story* and *A Baby Story* than they could from a parenting book. Thus, learning is one of the most common psychological effects of lifestyle programs.

However, some researchers have found evidence that disputes the assertion that learning is prevalent among lifestyle TV audiences. Dover and Hill (2007) discussed further audience effects, such as the finding that many viewers of lifestyle television thought that the genre was not valuable to them. Dover and Hill stated that "...77 per cent of viewers thought that it was important that consumer programmes were shown on television, compared to 18 per cent for lifestyle programmes" (2007, p. 31). The researchers also revealed data that shows, among other things, that audiences did not pick up practical tips from lifestyle programs. They stated: "Less than 10 per cent of respondents, across all social groups, claimed they learnt practical things from lifestyle programmes" (Dover and Hill, 2007, p. 35). Hill (2005) corroborated this statement in terms of makeover programs, as she says viewers of shows such as *Changing Rooms* are "...hard-pressed to come up with concrete examples of learning" (p. 93-94).

Winslow (2010) discussed the cultural implications of the lifestyle reality program *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. Throughout this paper, he dealt with the psychological impact that this show has on its audience. The main theme that ran through this paper is that *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* reinforced the "...dominant ideology of the American Dream and the myth of the classless society" (Winslow, 2010, p. 269). He posited that production and editing practices influenced audiences to identify and sympathize with the subjects of the home makeovers, and to think of them as "...moral and deserving of fantastic

material assistance” (Winslow, 2010, p. 269). In that way, audiences may see the recipients of this aid as relatable, and thus deserving of help.

Several examples showed that audiences who watch lifestyle reality programs have started to see these programs as a viable alternative to governmental intervention. Many audience members see this help as more accessible, and thus expect help from television programs more so than from their own government. Oullette and Hay wrote: “It is a sign of the times that hundreds of thousands of individuals now apply directly to reality TV programs not only for medical needs, but also for decent housing... tuition and income assistance...transportation...disaster relief...food, clothing, and other basic material needs” (2008, p. 32-33). Indeed, they went on to say that the program receives “...over 15,000 applications each week from families seeking to improve their housing situations in some way or another” (2008, p. 43). Evidently, many families feel that it is worth the time to apply to a reality program for help with their housing issues, despite the programs only accepting “...approximately one dozen” applications per season (Oullette and Hay, 2008, p. 43). The high application and extremely low acceptance rates highlight the disbelief of many families that their government could help them.

Another example of audiences looking to TV before government as an agent of help was seen in Doctor Phil’s efforts after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Oullette and Hay wrote:

The PhD-holding talk-show host visited makeshift shelters where he counseled victims how to overcome anger and fear, and “rebuild their lives” in the aftermath of the worst natural disaster in national memory. His gallant attempt to mobilize nongovernmental resources to deal with the emergency is another example of TV’s proactive role in the privatization of social services. (2008, p. 63).

While governmental Katrina relief efforts have been highly criticized, many audience members turned up at Doctor Phil’s sessions in the Houston Astrodome with the intent of being counseled

(Oullette and Hay, 2008). This illustrates the faith in the lifestyle and self-help genre of television, as individuals looked for aid from Dr. Phil rather than government-sponsored efforts.

Bratich (2007) echoed this sentiment in his discussion of reality makeover shows as fairy tales. He quoted Zipes (2002), who recorded how transformational reality shows (which fall into the lifestyle category) embodied a utopian impulse: "...it is the celebration of miraculous or fabulous transformation in the name of hope that accounts for its major appeal. People have always wanted to improve or change their personal status or have sought magical intervention on their behalf" (Zipes, as quoted in Bratich, 2007, p. 20). Bratich continued: "This transformative potential within fairy tales is retained in reality programming" (2007, p. 21). Audiences enjoy stories modeled after fairytales. Repeated exposure to lifestyle programs enacting positive changes on participants' bodies, homes, or cars may, according to Bratich, influence audiences to believe more in the healing power of the television program.

One final, and unexpected, psychological effect that lifestyle television programs may have is a classic media function: agenda-setting. Several researchers (Palmer, 2004; Di Mattia, 2007; Gailey, 2007; Weber, 2009) have found that lifestyle reality programs, most notably of the makeover variety, tell audiences what they should be focusing on in order to be accepted into society.

Nabi (2009) conducted a thorough study of audience members' psychological and behavioral effects when viewing cosmetic surgery programs. Among other things, she found that upward "...social comparison to program participants associated with lower overall body satisfaction", and "...viewers with higher overall body and body area satisfaction also reported feeling better about their own lives" (2009, p. 15). Thus, audience members who compare

themselves with the participants on the show will be less happy with their body, and audience members who are already happy with their body will be reinforced by viewing these shows.

Gailey (2007) reported that women are being fed a steady diet of stereotypes and images of so-called perfection through lifestyle reality TV. She generalized that “Women are either portrayed as material objects – little more than a collection of (often cartoonishly) formulaic body parts – or, equally limiting and pathological – as self-exploitative, entrepreneurial agents who are...willing to use their bodies to ‘get ahead’” (p. 110). Focusing solely on cosmetic surgery makeover programs such as *Dr. 90210*, Gailey explained that women are told of two contradictions they must endure in order to fit into society:

The first is that having and retaining a ‘hot’ body requires the intervention of highly trained surgeons employing an arsenal of high-tech weaponry. And second, women desiring liberation through the acquisition of ‘sexy’ new bodies must first submit themselves to intense rituals of physical violation, often followed by an intensely painful period of recovery. (Gailey, 2007, p. 111).

These shows explain that if women are ready to undergo these changes, they may be accepted by society.

Thus concludes the psychological effects for lifestyle programs. Lifestyle programs have a wide footprint across all different television channels, and their effects can be felt in a number of different ways. Let us now move on to the psychological effects of the documentary as diversion genre.

Documentary as Diversion

First, many audience members seem unified in their belief that not much practical learning takes place when watching a documentary as diversion program. Hill (2005) said that “The popularity of reality talentshows, and accompanying merchandise to the series, increases the entertainment value of the programmes whilst at the same time decreasing the informative value” (p. 86). One of her subjects, a mother of two, said of the British talent show *Popstars*:

“Well, perhaps there is something educational, I don’t know, but if there is I can’t see what it is” (Hill, 2005, p. 87). Hill (2005) reinforced this comment with her discussion on the stigma of reality programs. She posited that “...reality TV was described as the lowest common denominator TV...reality TV has low cultural capital...has little value in the cultural marketplace” (2005, p. 87). Because of this, “...viewers are hesitant to make such claims [about reality TV’s teaching benefits] because of the common assumption that watching reality TV is bad for you” (Hill, 2005, p. 85). In fact, “The stigma associated with watching reality TV is so great that the first response viewers commonly make when asked about informative elements in reality programming is to make a joke” (Hill, 2005, p. 85). She gave an example of this in an excerpt of an interview with a 39 year-old male: “Is there something you can learn from *Big Brother*?’ ‘Yeah, turn it off!’” (Hill, 2005, p. 85). This response and others like it shows the true place of documentary as diversion programs in our culture: low enough that many audience members will use humor in an effort to be distanced from it.

In concert with these findings, Leone et al. (2006) explored reality television’s perceived viewer effects. They surveyed 640 students from 2 universities in order to determine “...young people’s estimates of the effects of 3 reality television programs on themselves and others” (p. 253). This line of inquiry is instructive when viewing psychological effects of reality programs, because it uses the third-person perception theory, whereby individuals perceive others to be more affected by media than they themselves are (Leone et al., 2006, p. 253). The researchers found that this theory held true in their survey, as statistically significant data indicated that across all 5 hypotheses, respondents perceived others as more affected than themselves by reality programming (Leone et al., 2006). In addition to this finding, another effect found in this study is

that reality programming is seen as a negative social influence. Leone et al. quote Paul et al. (2000):

However, these findings indicate that the convenience sample of college-age respondents, who also happen to be the prime target and are among the heaviest consumers of reality shows, did not view the reality programs as innocuous or inane; instead, they perceived the material as harmful (more like television violence or pornography) to others. In believing that reality television negatively affects others more than it does themselves, these respondents aligned this genre of programming with “socially undesirable” media content. (Paul et al., as quoted in Leone et al., 2006, p. 265)

Labeling reality television as a socially undesirable media genre is a harsh criticism, especially from an audience that is perceived as the target market for these shows.

Another, more positive effect of documentary as diversion programs is the fan’s relationship with the participants of the shows. Referring most often to shows like *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Real World*, and *Road Rules*, this interaction is twofold. First, many fans become enamored with the participants and think of them as stars. Couldry (2009) recounted the finale of *Big Brother 3*, when the winner, Kate Lawler, was interviewed by the show’s host, Davina McCall:

[Kate] acted starstruck in front of Davina (who in Great Britain is a minor celebrity in her own right, because of *Big Brother*). Davina turned back to her the standard phrase used by fans on meeting their idol: “No, it’s me who can’t believe I’m sitting here with *you*.” (p. 86)

Audiences see these participants as celebrities, even though in most cases, their “...fame is tied to an ability to play oneself on camera” (Curnutt, 2009, p. 255). It is instructive to see the influence that television has, as these participants are overtly promoted as people picked directly from the general population, yet leave their shows with varying degrees of stardom.

Similarly, as audience members see that the participants are in their peer group, they may begin to identify with these cast members. This is how Susie Meister, a *Road Rules* contestant and the subject of Curnutt’s 2009 paper, became a reality star. She was a huge fan of the program, and the catalyst in her life came when she met one of the former castmembers who

lived in her city. Meister recalled this meeting: “‘And I met him after he did it and I was, like, star-struck. And I wrote him his first fan letter’” (Curnutt, 2009, p. 256). After meeting him and discussing the show, she realized that she could actually be a part of the program, and applied. This shows both psychological effects in question: the fanhood demonstrated by audience members, as well as the identification with these participants and subsequent thought that they could do the same thing. In an interview with Curnutt, Meister explained her reasoning behind applying to the show: “‘I thought I would be a fan crashing the party. Ah, I didn’t think I would be a real cast member, I only thought of myself as a fan so that’s why I did it. I wanted to see how it all worked, and experience the adventure’” (Curnutt, 2009, p. 256). Her meeting with a former *Road Rules* star precipitated this action, as she was shown that he was a regular person like her. This is a major effect on audience members of documentary as diversion programs: the realization that the stars on these shows are people just like themselves.

Oullette and Hay (2008) spoke to the issue of audience involvement. In a chapter entitled *Playing TV’s Democracy Game*, they discussed the fascination with programs that use viewer voting systems. While the voting for a particular contestant on a show such as *American Idol* is not a behavioral effect, the significance that audience members give to these shows is a psychological one. Oullette and Hay wrote:

A poll conducted by a company, Pursuant Inc., on the evening of the final [*Idol*] vote... purported that 35 percent of those casting votes for their favorite ‘American idol’ believed that their...vote ‘counted as much or more’ than their vote for president of the United States. (2008, p. 215)

This is staggering. In the most successful democratic country in history, a talent show that had been on their air less than ten years was deemed by some to have more significance than the presidential election. This, if nothing else, shows America’s devotion to reality television.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to provide a possible answer to two questions. First, what are the effects that reality television exerts on its audiences? And further, do these effects show that reality television is functioning as an agent of societal change?

As evidenced by the findings in the previous section, reality television has effects upon its audiences. These effects are both behavioral and psychological, and have been documented by a variety of studies. Nabi (2009), Di Mattia (2007), and Palmer (2007) all found evidence suggesting that lifestyle programs influence modeling behaviors in their audiences. Redden (2007) and Fraser (2007) discussed how purchase decisions are sometimes influenced by lifestyle programs. Additionally, Dover and Hill (2007), Hill (2005), Lewis (2008), Palmer (2004), and Stephens (2004) found evidence that lifestyle programs are responsible for audience learning. Further, Winslow (2010) and Oullette and Hay (2008) both found evidence suggesting that some audience members of lifestyle programs have begun to see the programs as a viable alternative to government intervention. Several researchers (Palmer, 2004; Di Mattia, 2007; Gailey, 2007; Weber, 2009) found that lifestyle reality programs, most notably of the makeover variety, tell audiences what they should be focusing on in order to be accepted into society. This phenomenon is known as agenda-setting, and shows that reality TV has measurable effects on its audiences.

We know that reality TV is pervasive enough to possibly be an agent of societal change. Hill (2005) says: “Popular series such as *American Idol*... have attracted up to and over 50 percent of the market share, which means more than half the population of television viewers tuned into these programmes” (p. 2). This type of mass exposure, coupled with the hundreds of

programs devoted to a wide range of topics for niche audiences, leaves no doubt as to the reach of the genre.

In order to understand whether or not these various audience effects result in a societal change, we need to examine this term. In this research, the discussion of societal change will focus on this term in a positive light. Jacobs and Asokan (1999) explain: “Development can be broadly defined in a manner applicable to all societies at all historical periods as an upward ascending movement featuring greater levels of energy, efficiency, quality, productivity, complexity, comprehension, creativity, mastery, enjoyment and accomplishment” (p. 152). While this definition applies to sweeping changes like those catalyzed by the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression, the US Civil Rights Movement, and 9/11, it can possibly also refer to smaller-scale changes.

Furthermore, according to van der Veen (2002), “...human society is an ongoing process rather than an entity or structure, as humans interact they negotiate order, structure and cultural meanings. Reality is an ongoing social symbolic construction put together by human interaction” (p. 1). This view of societal change is more applicable to the topic at hand, as it says that society is always evolving. Thus, new phenomena (like reality television) are simply effects of combinations of previous phenomena and/or societal stances. Moreover, factors prevalent in society now (such as reality television) could be indicators of future change. With this idea in mind, we can look at the ways that our findings are or are not harbingers of societal change.

Starting with lifestyle television’s behavioral effects, the evidence indicates that audience members’ modeling their acts after what they see on television represents a societal change. Modeling behaviors were found to occur when audiences watched cosmetic surgery makeover shows and lifestyle help shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Di Mattia, 2007). The

audiences of these programs are experiencing a form of learning never before available in our culture. As a product of the television landscape, these programs are becoming more prevalent and are catering to more individualized tastes. Audiences receive these messages more than ever before, and are encouraged to enact the behaviors shown in order to have a better life. As this happens, the research suggests that these modeling behaviors will continue, and will make a ripple in the social fabric.

The modeling behavior found seemed to suggest a societal change. In contrast with this, the findings seem to indicate that purchase decisions are not an indicator of a lasting societal impact. While some programs may push certain products on their audiences, either passively or actively, this will not affect society in any major way. In the example of purchase decisions, the process is situated within the historical context of marketers using television programming as a means to reach audiences. Redden (2007) and Fraser (2007) both introduced ideas that lifestyle programs influence audiences to buy products depicted in the shows. This idea is not new, and has in fact been in use for the entirety of television's commercial life. This conduct will continue, but it doesn't seem like it will influence the culture in any new way.

As we move on to the behavioral effects of documentary as diversion programs, we see less evidence for a possible societal change being enacted. Some discussion, in general terms, of the lessons learned from these programs was put forth. Additionally, Ferris et al. (2007) reported some minor behaviors that viewers of these programs said they would be more likely to enact after seeing the shows. Overall, however, the evidence resulted in negligible results for the behavioral effects of documentary as diversion programs.

Psychological effects provided a richer depth of findings for both types of reality programming. In lifestyle television, learning was discussed, both of the viewer's own social

culture and of various practical skills. Additionally, many audience members put more faith in these programs than their own civic institutions to help them in times of need. A third psychological effect prevalent in lifestyle reality programming was that these programs are responsible for agenda-setting, especially when it comes to female body image and social acceptance. A fourth finding took steps to negate these effects entirely, as a survey by Dover and Hill (2007) found that audiences believed that lifestyle programs were neither important nor practically helpful. However, taken in concert, the previous three findings outweighed this one survey by Dover and Hill.

Social learning is a necessary part of everyone's growth, a process normally undertaken by a person's social group, whether it be in the family, at school, or with friends. This function is now being usurped by reality television, as one can sit on the couch and learn valuable lessons about social interactions. Further, reality television has become the de facto leader in the role of agenda-setting, as many programs show audiences how to look, act, and dress. Van der Veen (2002) would approve of this view of societal change, as the media is communicating to people how they should present themselves in order to be accepted by their peers. Those peers are also receiving the same message at the same time.

Both of these findings spoke to the idea that lifestyle reality television may be an agent of societal change. However, the discovery that answered this question most accurately was the one describing how audience members felt about lifestyle reality programs.

The evidence suggested that audiences sincerely believed that applying for help via a lifestyle program was (and is) a viable, and sometimes better, course of action than asking for assistance from their local government. According to Oullette and Hay (2008): "It is a sign of the times that hundreds of thousands of individuals now apply directly to reality TV programs not

only for medical needs, but also for decent housing... tuition and income assistance...transportation...disaster relief...food, clothing, and other basic material needs” (p. 32-33). This relates to the research question directly. Rather than enlisting the help of their local government or even their neighbors, more and more audience members are applying to a television program to fix their problems for them. This shows a distinct shift in the way that television is conceived, as it takes on the role of a government unburdened by any political or regulatory laws.

The psychological effects of documentary as diversion programs produce a distinct lack of evidence for this genre being an agent of societal change. The findings discovered in this research indicated surface effects incapable of widespread change. Fans of this genre were found to relate to and identify with the stars of these shows, the genre was perceived by fans as more powerful in affecting others than themselves, and fans saw no practical learning evident in these programs. In fact, viewers in one study were found to be unable to even discuss the potential of learning from the program *Big Brother* without resorting to humor as a way of lessening the stigma. From all indications, consumers tended to perceive documentary as diversion to be just that: a diversion. However, there is a fanatical devotion to some of these programs. Audiences follow these programs religiously and use their votes judiciously. The significance given to this genre is great, but in the end, the societal change is negligible. Millions of audience members tuning in and/or voting on their favorite program will do little to alter society. Little practical knowledge gained combined with the tendency to deny any knowledge or effects with the genre suggests that documentary as diversion has not created a profound societal change.

Conclusion

The focus of this research was to uncover the answers to two questions. First, what effects do reality television programs exert on their audiences? Further, do these effects indicate that reality TV is functioning as an agent of societal change? After research done through the university's library network, several findings were unearthed, and discussion of these findings followed. These findings served to answer the first research question.

The answer to the second of the two research questions is twofold. Lifestyle programs, it can be argued, may serve as an agent of societal change. There is significant evidence that these programs promote audience modeling, influence purchase decisions, set the agenda of what is socially important, teach practical knowledge, and serve as a kind of governmental help program sans the shackles of traditional government. As these shows become ever more popular, the cultural discourse surrounding them will grow. The quantity and consequence of the behavioral and psychological effects already attributed to these programs suggests that they are agents of societal change.

The research suggested that documentary as diversion programs fell on the other side of the spectrum. Claims that these programs can teach audiences social interaction skills are far outweighed by the evidence suggesting that these shows are nothing more than, as one survey subject eloquently put it, "Twaddle" (Hill, 2005, p. 85). Many audience members try to distance themselves from the genre by either positing that they themselves are not affected by it (though others may be), or by asserting that there is nothing to learn from these shows. These latter subjects often used humor in their answers, as if answering a question of this type with a straight face would imply that you took the genre seriously – something that would be highly

stigmatized. For these reasons, it is clear that documentary as diversion would be hard-pressed to describe itself as an agent of societal change.

Limitations

This study method had several limitations. First, no primary research was conducted. While much of the research was relatively recent, the genre of reality television deserves study through primary research as it is expanding by the day. In addition, I relied on the work of other researchers and drew conclusions based upon their findings, whereas primary research would have allowed me to control my own experiment. Primary research could have detected further audience effects that went undetected through the current study method.

Secondly, the genre of reality television was only broken down into two sections. While the broad terms of ‘lifestyle television’ and ‘documentary as diversion’ work as reality TV genre indicators, more precise data could have been demonstrated by further dividing these genres. Perhaps, for example, makeover programs are agents of societal change, but intervention shows are not. Or, for another example, perhaps some documentary as diversion shows (maybe crime shows such as *COPS*) do serve as agents of societal change. These limitations served to abridge some potential findings.

Further Research

There are many directions for further research on this topic, and several studies (Bagdasarov et al. 2010, Ferris et al. 2007, Mendible 2004, Ebersole and Woods 2007) have called this. Reality television is a genre that is expanding by the day. Future researchers could survey the television market, exploring the rise of reality television in the last decade, and what it

means for our society. Further, researchers could use audience survey tactics to determine if audiences are content with this amount of reality programming, and whether the genre is actually maximizing producers' profits. Another possible line of research could inquire into the effects that reality television has upon its producers. Are they disappointed with being unable to create any new fictional programming? Are they content with the profits they are making? Are these profits substantially better than those before the reality television explosion? The potential for research on this topic is vast.

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